

"ONE PICTURE IS WORTH A THOUSAND WORDS,"

a popular saying



Orphaned characters are extremely common as literary protagonists, and abandonment by parents is a persistent theme in myth, fairy tales, fantasy, ancient poetry, and children's literature. We find orphaned heroes in sacred texts: Moses, the great prophet was abandoned in infancy; and in legends, such as that of the founding of Rome by Romulus and Remus who were reared by a she-wolf.

The classic orphan is one of the most widespread characters in literature. For example: in the 19th century one can find Dickens' *Oliver Twist* and *David Copperfield*; Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*; and Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. In the 20th century we meet James Henry Trotter from Roald Dahl's *James and the Giant Peach*; Dorothy from the *Wizard of Oz*; and the Harry Potter series, first published in 1997. So far, young Mr. Potter has been arguably the most famous character – orphaned or otherwise – of the 21st century.

Authors orphan their characters in order to free them from family obligations and supervision, to force them to pursue a more interesting or adventurous life, or simply to deprive them of a more prosaic existence. The removal of parents and loving guardians creates self-contained, introspective characters who strive for affection.

Although orphans can be a useful literary technique, these invented lives do not reflect reality. Orphaned characters in fiction are often remarkably – even unbelievably – successful, sentimental, or wise beyond their years. In reality, the lives of actual orphans are all too often deeply traumatic, lonely, and brief¹.

The true drama of orphan life is far more realistically portrayed throughout history in paintings and by other visual means.

The difference is stark: images of orphans in fine art are extremely rare – one can easily number on the fingers the paintings in the world that portray orphaned characters.

After extensive research among the world's famous fine art collections, the authors identified just twenty examples that depict orphaned subjects. The following analyses of each illustration are grouped as either Mythical Fine Art, Historical Genre Paintings, or different types of Genre Paintings which are listed in roughly chronological order.

Orphans in Mythical Fine Art

The pattern of orphan images has served as a mythic prototype in fine art, beginning with the old masters' depictions of legendary biblical scenes and continuing along the scale to a more realistic vision of common people. The legendary founders of Rome are colourfully depicted by Pierre de Cortone in this representation of the orphaned twins Romulus and Remus, nurtured by a mother wolf and found by a herdsman.

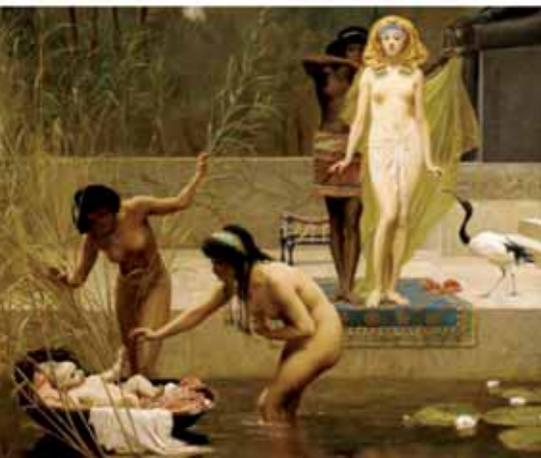


¹ Leoutsakas, D. (2003). *The Orphan Tales: Real and imagined stories of parental loss*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University South Florida, Tampa, Florida



Pietro BERRETTINI
1643
**ROMULUS AND REMUS
GIVEN SHELTER BY
FAUSTULUS**
Musee du Louvre, Paris

Frederick GOODALL
1885
**THE FINDING OF
MOSES**
Private collection



PIETRO BERRETTINI,
KNOWN AS PIETRO DA CORTONA
OR PIERRE DE CORTONE (1597 –1669)
Italian painter and architect of High Baroque

Romulus and Remus Given Shelter by Faustulus
1643

The legend of the founding of Rome

In his writings Livy (Titus Livius) recounts the origins of the Eternal City. Twin brothers, Romulus and Remus, born of the god Mars and the vestal priestess Rhea Silvia, were set adrift on the River Tiber in a cradle. They were discovered by Faustulus, the herdsman of the king of Alba's flocks. The scene shows the shepherd bringing one of the abandoned children to his wife. With his left hand he indicates the presence of the other child, suckled by the she-wolf, to the right. The man's face displays an unshakeable will. The woman leaves her work and accepts the baby into her arms: this saving gesture sets the ground for the foundation of Rome and the destruction of Alba. A dove, symbolizing Venus, mother of Aeneas and thus the ancestor to the twins, alights on the thatched roof of an open structure, within which a servant is busy at her tasks.

A prestigious destination

This work comes from the collection of Louis Phelypeaux de La Vrilliere, secretary of state to Louis XIV. With nine other works of the same dimensions inspired by Greek and Roman historical themes, this collection was destined to adorn the Hotel de Toulouse in Paris, today the Banque de France.

Musee du Louvre, Paris

The next painting is an illustration of a sacred Biblical text. Many painters have chosen to interpret the story of Moses, who, according to the Bible, was adopted by Pharaoh's daughter.

FREDERICK GOODALL (1822–1904)
English painter

The Finding of Moses
1885

One story we find repeated in myths and sacred texts the world over is the birth-story of a great prophet or leader abandoned in infancy. Moses was born in Egypt at a time when the Pharaoh had commanded that all Hebrew males were to be drowned in the Nile at birth. When his mother could not hide the infant, she placed him in a small boat made of bulrushes and set it to sail down the river. The baby was found by Pharaoh's daughter and grew up to become her adopted son, all the while watched over by his original mother, who had been appointed to be his nurse.

From the numerous Biblical Art paintings *The Finding of Moses* by Frederic Goodall is distinguished by its close identity to the Biblical description. Later it was engraved by Richard Josey, a prominent mezzotint engraver in Victorian London. *The Finding of Moses*, after Frederick Goodall was among his more successful religious subjects.

Private collection

In an example of the painter's shift to a more reality-based portrayal of an orphan, Victor Vasnetsov re-created his own vision of Alyonushka from the touching Russian fairytale of orphaned siblings *Alyonushka and Her Brother Ivanushka* by Afanasyev.

VIKTOR VASNETSOV (1848–1926)
Russian painter who specialized in mythological
and historical subjects

“Alyonushka”
1881

The famous *“Alyonushka”* is one of the painter's most remarkable creations. Vasnetsov does not adhere to the precise textual content of the fairy tale. It is only the starting point for the painter's imagination, created in accordance with the tradition of folk tales, which are the breath of Russian poetry.

In this story of orphaned children, Ivanushka has been transformed into a baby goat. His older sister Alyonushka, met and married a merchant who promised to let the little goat live happily with them. Their idyll is destroyed when a witch throws her into the river with a heavy stone around her neck, assumes her personality and seeks to persuade the merchant to kill the goat.

Vasnetsov does not depict these literal elements. Instead he portrays Alyonushka sitting dejectedly on the stone on the river bank, mourning her loss and wondering whether her brother in his hapless orphan state has met a similar fate to her own.

Alyonushka's pose, the drooping head, awkwardly placed feet, the angularity of her thin arms and the look of desperation in her eyes highlight her desolate plight. The painter has captured in pictorial form the essence of Russian fairy tales. Vasnetsov's talent has forever enshrined in the mind the image of this sad, lonely, abandoned girl. As she contemplates the harsh, unjust fate that has ruined their young lives her isolation is reinforced by the darkness of the water and the surrounding impenetrable forest. The painter expressed the relationship between nature and personal suffering with incomparable perfection.

The State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow



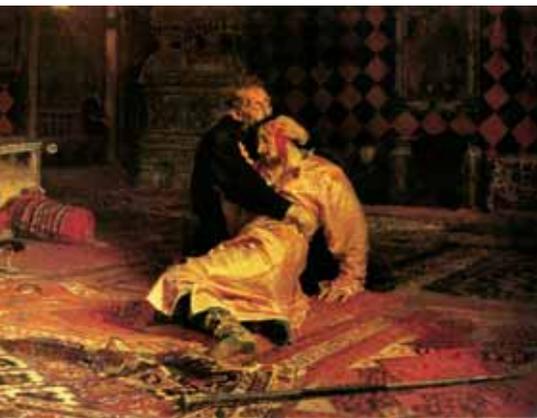
Viktor VASNETSOV
1881
“ALYONUSHKA”
*The State Tretyakov Gallery,
Moscow*

**Images of Orphans in Historical
Genre Painting**

We have two contrasting examples of historical genre painting that reflect royal orphaned characters. The first example is the Russian Tsar Ivan “The Terrible.” His legendary personality was the direct result of his tragically orphaned childhood, which is a well-documented part of Russian history.

Known to most Russians as Ivan Grozny (the Cruel), Ivan IV “The Terrible” ruled from 1547 until his death in 1584. He was the first ruler known by the title Tsar. His father, Vasiliy III, died when Ivan was only three years old, and his mother, Elena Glin-skaya, died five years later. Neglected and abused by the Boyars (Russian Nobles) of the court, he became a virtual beggar in his own palace and witnessed murders and beatings as the Boyars erupted in a bloody struggle for power.

Ivan's young psyche was twisted by the trauma and evil that was rampant during his childhood: he became a cruel, disturbed man and an accomplished drinker. After the



ILYA REPIN
1870-1873
**IVAN THE TERRIBLE
AND HIS SON IVAN**
*State Tretyakov Gallery,
Moscow*

death of his first wife in 1560 (he had eight wives), Ivan's erratic behaviour and psychotic rages became more uncontrolled and more frequent. On November 19, 1581, Ivan the Terrible flew into a rage over the clothes worn by his son Ivan's pregnant wife. He beat her viciously, and she suffered a miscarriage. The younger Ivan challenged his father about this beating: Ivan the Terrible raised his iron-tipped staff and, in blind anger, struck his son a mortal blow to the temple. The Prince languished in a coma for several days before he died².

ILYA REPIN (1844–1930)
Russian painter of the Peredvizhniki (the Society for Travelling Art Exhibitions) artistic school

Ivan the Terrible and his son Ivan 1870–1873

This painting is a powerful, mysterious creation: executed in gloomy brown, crimson, and golden tones, it displays the scene of Ivan the Terrible killing his son Ivan. The insane and tortured eyes of the father – already repenting his offense, and the drenching wound on his son's temple are deeply impressive.

State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow

The second historical plot about orphaned siblings of the deceased king of England Edward IV was depicted by the French artist Paul Delaroche. Edward V the presumed heir and his brother Richard were killed on the order of their uncle Richard III.

PAUL DELAROCHE (1798–1856)
French painter

The Children of Edward 1831

The imminent crime

Two pale-faced children cling to each other on a bed in a dark room. Edward V and his nine year-old brother Richard, orphans of the deceased king of England, Edward IV, have heard a noise and stopped reading. Edward V gazes melancholically at us while his younger brother looks anxiously towards the door; their dog stares at the shadow of a foot in the light under the door: the artist suggests their impending doom.

Edward's children were smothered to death in 1483 on the orders of their uncle, who took the throne under the name of Richard III. This tragic episode in English history is popularized in Shakespeare's play, *Richard III*. Delaroche has reconstructed a novel sense of dramatic suspense and purified his style, using extravagant pictorial effects to reflect historic detail. The dark – almost black – background emphasizes the tragedy of the situation.

Musee du Louvre



PAUL DELAROCHE
1831
**THE CHILDREN OF
EDWARD**
Musee du Louvre

² Green, V. *The Madness of Kings (Personal Trauma and the Fate of Nations)*, Allan Sutton Publishing Ltd, 1994

Genre Painting Depicting Poor Urban Orphans

The genre of urban poor is not addressed in the Renaissance styles patronized by Church and Court. Notable painters usually served them by depicting scenes of court life, Greek mythology or historical or Biblical subjects. Eventually, and possibly inspired by works of Pieter Brueghel the Elder that portray urban street life, artists began to depict street themes of everyday life. For examples, we turn to the fine art of Europe, beginning in the 17th century with a work by the Spaniard Bartolommeo Murillo that reflects a street child surviving as a beggar.

BARTOLOMÉ ESTEBAN MURILLO (1617–1682)
Spanish painter of the seventeenth century

The Young Beggar 1645

Among the pictures painted by Murillo in his youth are several affectionate studies of the ragged boys and flower girls of Seville. Street children became a subject that is frequently examined throughout his career. *The Young Beggar*, with his bare, dirty feet, torn clothing, and scraps of food, reflects the misery of homeless children in Seville during its Golden Age.

Musee du Louvre, Paris

Web Museum, Paris, <http://www.ibiblio.org/wm/paint/auth/murillo/>

JAN DE BRAY (1626–1697)
Dutch painter, representative of Dutch classicism

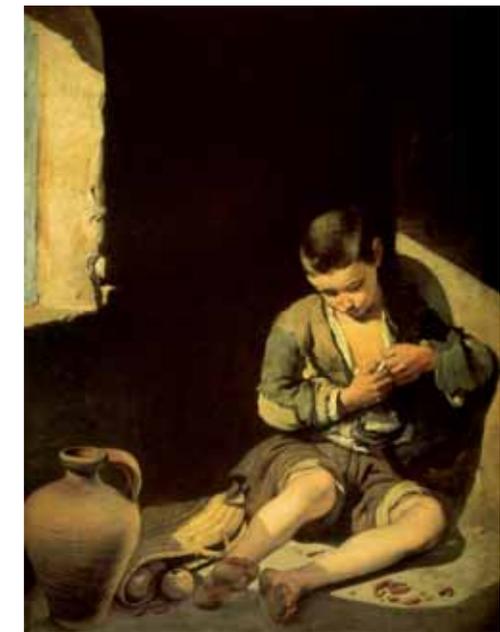
To take care of orphans 1663

Jan de Bray was the son of the painter and architect Salomon de Bray. He is known for his portraits and historical works. *To Take Care of Orphans*, also named *Tending of Orphans*, depicts a chaotic scene of townspeople bringing food and clothing to a group of orphans.

Frans Hals Museum, Haarlem, Holland

In the 19th century, English artist Thomas Kennington and a painter from the Newlyn School, Blandford Fletcher, expanded upon Murillo's original themes with piercing works that fill the viewer with hopelessness.

JAN DE BRAY
1663
**TO TAKE CARE OF
ORPHANS**
Frans Hals Museum, Haarlem, Holland



**BARTOLOMÉ ESTEBAN
MURILLO**
1645
THE YOUNG BEGGAR
Musee du Louvre, Paris
Web Museum, Paris



THOMAS KENNINGTON
1885, 1890
ORPHANS, HOMELESS
Bendigo Art Gallery, Victoria, Australia

THOMAS KENNINGTON
(1856–1916)
English painter

Orphans, Homeless
1885, 1890

Thomas Kennington was a founding member of the New English Art Club in 1886. He was well known for his compelling paintings of the urban poor. The rich colouring, smooth handling, and even the subject matter were probably inspired by Murillo's work. *Homeless* was painted by Kennington in late Victorian England, commissioned by benefactors as one in a series of paintings (*Homeless, Orphans* and *A Pinch of Poverty*) intended to illustrate the dominant social evils of London. Kennington's paintings were created to be the means by which concerned citizens could send a message to the population as a whole, via the popular press, about the horrors of this megalopolis of urban decay and crowded, impoverished settlements.

Bendigo Art Gallery, Victoria, Australia



BLANDFORD FLETCHER
1887
EVICTED
Queensland Art Gallery, Australia

BLANDFORD FLETCHER (1858–1936)
English painter, a member of the Newlyn School, based in southwestern England.

Evicted
1887

The painting presents the narrative of a dispossessed widow and her child, forced to leave their home while the top-hatted bailiff and the village look on. Fletcher's choice of an overcast autumn day heightens the sense of loss and sadness. The leaves littering the ground and the child's broken toy add to the drama.

Some artists chose to portray the plight of the poor, but often disguised the bleakness of the event under a veil of sentiment which appealed to, but did not offend, middle-class viewers and buyers.

Queensland Art Gallery, Australia



KONRAD GROB (1828–1904)
Swiss painter, representative of romantic school of paintings

Pestalozzi with the orphans in Stans
1879

The painting depicts Pestalozzi's paying a visit to orphans. Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi (1746 — 1827) was a famous Swiss teacher and educational reformer. During six months of work at Stans, he provided an example of teaching according to the principles he developed, including education through observation, training of the whole man, and a sympathetic approach by the teacher to his pupil. This painting was executed in the manner of Old Dutch Paintings, with light emphasizing the central figures.

Museum of Art, Basel, Switzerland

**French Genre Painting
Depicting Orphaned Subjects**

French painters of the XIX century eagerly responded to the shrill subject of orphan life. Their vision often represented the orphan in tragic circumstances.

EUGENE DELACROIX (1798–1863)
French romantic painter

Orphan Girl in a Cemetery
1824

It is easy to feel the air of sadness emanating from this picture. The beautifully delicate lines of the girl's face and neck and the light touch of fabric heighten the impression of isolation. The outlines are clear and precise and the young girl is sharply defined against the softened edges of the sky and the deserted cemetery. Delacroix has subtly conveyed signs of the girl's grief — the tears welling up in her dark-ringed eyes, the half-open mouth, the way her gown has slipped off her shoulder, her hand lying limply on her thigh. The cold, dull colours of her clothing and the landscape echo the overall atmosphere of despair. Delacroix convinces us that this orphan's hopes, whatever they may be, are in vain.

Musee du Louvre

JEAN-BAPTIST CARPEAUX (1827–1875)
French sculptor and painter, post-impressionist

Brother and Sister, Two Orphans of the Siege of Paris in 1870–71

The Siege of Paris, lasting from September 19, 1870 to January 28, 1871, brought about French defeat in the Franco-Prussian War and led to the establishment of the German Empire. Many children were sacrificed and even more became orphans during this siege.



KONRAD GROB
1879
PESTALOZZI WITH THE ORPHANS IN STANS
Museum of Art, Basel, Switzerland

EUGENE DELACROIX
1824
ORPHAN GIRL IN A CEMETERY
Musee du Louvre, Paris





The girl and her brother are depicted in Post-Impressionist style, standing by a ruined wall: impressive and unlikely survivors after a fierce bombardment. This painting shows the future of France, won through brutal losses and at a heavy price.

Musee des Beaux-Arts, Tourcoing, France

WILLIAM-ADOLPH BOUGUEREAU (1825–1905)

French painter

Charity

1878

In this monumental work which was first exhibited at the Paris Salon in 1865, Bouguereau presents a woman with three children huddled in front of the church of the Madeleine in Paris. With its centralised composition and low viewpoint, the painting was conceived as an altarpiece, with the mother becoming a kind of secular Madonna.

Smith College Museum of Art, Northampton, Massachusetts

JEAN-BAPTIST
CARPEAUX
BROTHER AND SISTER,
TWO ORPHANS OF
THE SIEGE OF PARIS
IN 1870-71

*Musee des Beaux-Arts,
Tourcoing, France*

WILLIAM-ADOLPH
BOUGUEREAU
1878

CHARITY

*Smith College Museum of Art,
Northampton, Massachusetts*



Provody Pokoynika (Final Journey)

1865

This painting depicts a sleigh carrying children, a coffin, and a woman. The woman is seen only from behind, but somehow the painter has clearly conveyed her deep loss: this family is completely alone, with empty hearts and no means with which to survive.

The dignity of this painting is in its wholeness and balance. The sleigh is moving slowly, the horse straining with the effort of climbing even this small hillock. The woman's back, under the sheepskin coat, is bent, but not in the smooth line of fatigue: instead the line of the back is partly broken. The children clinging to the coffin are a balance to the profound, tired grief of their mother. We can imagine how terrible their life was while the father was alive, and how much more dismal it will be in the future.

Russian Genre Painting Depicting the Tragic Fate of Orphans

The themes of abandonment and the hopelessness of orphans are typical of Russian paintings of the 19th century. They are reflected in stark honesty in the works of members of the *Peredvizhniki* Society, such as Vasily Perov, Nicolai Nevrev, and Karl Lemoch.

VASILY PEROV (1834–1882)

This Russian painter is one of the founding members of *Peredvizhniki* (the Society for Travelling Art Exhibitions).

They are alone except for a small dog running in the snowdrifts along the side, and the wind whistling between the pine trees.

The painting, however, is not quite complete without the subtle break in the clouds above their heads, which give the picture space and gather the viewer into the vast emptiness of the harsh lives that lie ahead.

State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow

NIKOLAI HEVREV (1830–1904)

This Russian painter is one of the members of *Peredvizhniki* (the Society for Travelling Art Exhibitions).

Vospitannitsa (The Ward)

1867

This expressive painting in dark, sombre tones portrays a desperate turning-point in the life of an orphaned girl who has been living as a ward to a rich, landowning family. She must be secretly married to her seducer, a 'fop' whose face is turned away from the proceedings: he obviously has no further interest in the girl or her situation. Nevertheless, the high-handed noblewoman is negotiating with the priest to have them married off.

State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow

NIKOLAI HEVREV
1867

VOSPITANNITSA (THE
WARD)

*State Tretyakov Gallery,
Moscow*



VASILY PEROV
1865

PROVODY POKOYNIKA
(FINAL JOURNEY)

*State Tretyakov Gallery,
Moscow*

West-European Genre Paintings of Orphans, Beginning in the 19th Century

Only a few West-European genre painters of the early XX century turned to the sad subject of orphan life, a significant social evil, tragic and hopeless.



EDVARD MUNCH
1899-1900
THE DEAD MOTHER
Kunsthalle, Bremen

EDVARD MUNCH (1863–1944)
Norwegian painter and printmaker, impressionist

The Dead Mother
1899–1900

This ghastly painting seeps under one's skin. The dead mother lies, with transparent skin, on the bed while her young daughter stands beside her in apparent disbelief and denial. She has lost her mother, and there is no one else to guide her to adulthood. How will she deal with her mother's death: frustration, fear, sadness? In any case, she is alone, and her eyes implore the viewer to help her — to somehow bring her mother back. She cannot face the idea of life as an orphan.

Kunsthalle, Bremen

NICOLAAS VAN DER WAAY (1855–1936)

Dutch painter, whose speciality was somewhat sentimental pictures of orphans.

Amsterdam Orphan Girl
(1890–1910)

The artist continues the Dutch tradition of deftly using soft light to poetically illuminate his subject: an orphan girl standing by a window, reading a book. Two and a half centuries after Vermeer's masterpiece, Dutch artists were revisiting and renewing their artistic legacy.

Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

KATHE KOLLWITZ (1867–1945)

German Expressionist printmaker and sculptor

Widows and Orphans Charcoal, etching and print
1919

In *Widows and Orphans*, women in deep sorrow and despair are holding their children. They huddle close, as if trying to gain some comfort from each other. A woman without a child clings to the edge of the group: her hands cover her face, as if she is weeping. There is no anger, screaming, or tears on display, only a burdensome silence, overflowing with anguish.

"Kollwitz' work is unique because it includes no scenes of combat or material devastation. Rather, it represents the phenomenon of war entirely from the perspective of the home front, of mothers and children in particular"³.

Our study of orphans in art ends with a tragic reversal: Kollwitz was a painter and mother who suffered the loss of her own son. One year after his death, she reflected in her diary: "The one consolation would be to believe in a personal continuance of life. Then one has to imagine that the Great Spirit embodied itself in a similar form, so that one caught the breath of something again when one came across such a person — if he had had a child, there would be traces of him left"⁴.

This attempt to collect and examine the subject of orphan images in the world's fine art leads to many more thoughts and questions, but one conclusion is certain. The despair, tragedy, and hopelessness of orphan life is faithfully represented in the world's art, which may be exactly why artists so rarely choose to depict this subject.

This is in stark contrast to the literary representation of orphans throughout history — the subject is repeated in mythology, history, and legends as well as numerous works of the Bible. Literary orphans are almost without exception portrayed as heroes of the ancient archetype, surviving challenges to reach a happy ending that is as inevitable as it is unrealistic.

People don't want to think about a sad subject.

³ Prelinger E. *Kathe Kollwitz*, National Gallery of Art, Washington. New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1992.

⁴ Kollwitz H. *The diary and letters of Kathe Kollwitz*. Evanston, IL, Northwestern University Press, 1988



NICOLAAS VAN DER WAAY
1890-1910
AMSTERDAM ORPHAN GIRL
Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

KATHE KOLLWITZ
1919
WIDOWS AND ORPHANS
Charcoal, etching and print

